

SUZUKI PIANO BASICS FOUNDATION NEWS

Volume 1.5, November/December 1996

To facilitate, promote, and educate the public on the way of teaching and playing the piano taught at the Talent Education Research Institute in Matsumoto, Japan.

ON OBSERVING

by Dr. Haruko Kataoka

As with all things, in learning to play the piano observing lessons is a valuable first step.

Usually when parents feel that it is time for their child to begin learning piano, they think only of the child sitting at the piano and having his or her own lesson. However, we should not rush into this stage. Think about how babies learn their native language. From the day babies are born until about a year later they do not say anything. They only listen and observe people around them speaking. When they do begin to speak themselves they make extremely rapid progress. This is not only true for learning one's native language. All things in life are observed from birth, and babies learn a multitude of things while casually observing without any concerted effort.

A young child just beginning to learn piano has never seen a piano lesson and does not understand what it means to "learn" this skill. Because of this, a minimum of one month's observation is necessary before the child's own individual lessons should begin. In my class one admirable parent brought her child to observe for a full six months before the lessons began.

As the first step in the learning process, I always make it a point to have new students, whether they happen to be three or four years old or older, observe students of about the same age taking lessons. I also explain to parents the importance of observing. I have been teaching young children in this way for a number of years, so that I thought I now fully understood the importance of observing.

However, I recently had an astounding experience! Forty years ago, when I began teaching in Matsumoto, I was so busy that I could not do much for my own children when it came to piano. However, after my son's eldest daughter turned three, he told me that she wanted to start piano lessons. I wondered why he was being so conscientious about piano after his own experience, but I told him to bring her once to the studio.

He brought her at the predetermined time. However, being in a familiar setting she acted spoiled. And my son announced that his wife was working and could not be there and that he had to go also, leaving his daughter alone with me. I felt that we are now generations of hopeless parents, and that this situation could not be helped, that it was due to the way I had raised my own children. So I asked a student assistant to keep my granddaughter occupied doing origami during the lessons so that her behavior would not cause problems.

That day started with three beginners who were learning to bow. Most of the time was spent explaining things to the parents, so there was very little time spent actually teaching the children. After that, there were lessons for two advanced students. Then I took my granddaughter home after the day's lessons were finished. After supper, she watched a Disney video and played until she fell asleep.

On the following day something amazing happened after breakfast when I brought her into my home studio. With a totally different expression than usual, she cheerfully said, "Oh! a piano," and ran over to it. She stopped suddenly in front of the bench, bowed, and then climbed up. I was astonished.

This three-year-old child had just been sitting in my studio during lessons. Not once did she actually "pay attention" to what was going on. The student assistant was keeping her occupied, and she was lost in her play. They were so engrossed in what they were doing, in fact, that I had had to ask them to be quiet on several occasions because of their animated talking. I had thought to myself that three years old was still too young to observe other lessons in her case. And yet, here she was bowing in front of the piano without my having asked her to do this!

Simply from having been in the studio during lessons, she was able to see, hear, and remember. Also, until this time she had only made noise on the piano, but now, suddenly, she was moving her fingers separately and positioning her hands like an accomplished pianist. These were things that she had not practiced and which I had not taught her. She had somehow learned all this just by watching yesterday!

Children are amazing. Adults, paying very close attention when they have a deep desire to learn something, are able to grasp just a minuscule part of it. Compared to this, children, although they may be totally lost in another activity, will be able to absorb all that is happening around them. In the eyes of an adult, this is miraculous.

Can we really understand this? Even when children are not watching or listening, even if they appear totally disinterested, everything will be just fine if adults simply create a good environment around them. They will absorb everything that is there. In the case of observing music, play the recordings of great artists quietly and constantly at home. If you play videotapes of great artists as well, children will not only hear their performance, but will be able to learn their physical technique as well.

At the studio, do not just take your lesson, but observe the lessons of students who are slightly more advanced than you are. When going to concerts, select the best ones with first-class performers.

In short, always remember that children are observing their surroundings and maturing from the day they are born.

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1997 Piano Basics Workshops with Dr. Kataoka:

June 8-13: Louisville, Kentucky, Grace Baugh Bennett, 502-852-0537

June 23-27: Salt Lake City, Utah, Cleo Brimhall, 801-943-1237

August 4-8: Rochester, New York, Karen Hagberg, 716-244-0490

August 17-21: Sacramento, California, Linda Nakagawa, 916-422-2952

The next international conference will be August 1998, place to be determined.

**Images from the
International Suzuki Piano Conference,
Atlanta, Georgia**

by Pam Smith

"May the Circle Be Unbroken"

A little boy sits on the floor of the lobby of a downtown concert hall. He opens his small, red lunchbox and begins to examine the contents. Lifting out each item, he lines up his sandwich, a little bundle of green grapes, and a granola bar. His index finger plays a game by which he selects the sandwich; opening the edges a little for further examination. Closing the bread back and mashing it firmly, he slowly chews through the crust into the soft, white middle, pausing periodically to lick some gooey, purplish substance from his tiny fingers.

Suddenly the boy halts all of his activity and his face turns upward toward the sound coming from the center of the room; the sound of piano music...Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star...The boy's body becomes still, his face soft and tilted toward the young girl playing the piano. Gently his body begins a rhythmic accompaniment. He continues this silent drumbeat with each successive tune; sometimes stronger, sometimes almost imperceptible. He jerks his head toward the teacher who is now moving through the group of children whispering directions that it is time to go. The boy places his barely eaten lunch back into his small, red lunchbox, stands up and follows the leaders around the back of the lobby, out the door, down the sidewalk back to his daycare center.

A young man walks onto a stage of a downtown concert hall. The light falls onto his smiling face. He bows to the audience. He seats himself on the bench placed in front of the ordered row of black and white keys. The rich, patent concert grand piano stretches across the stage like a panther cat. There is a hushed silence. The stark silhouette is framed by wood; the light pulling the grain of the walls and floors into an exaggerated elegance. The clear, ringing tone slices the silence. Vibrations begun with hammers striking strings inside the well-crafted Kawai grand reach the walls and ceiling of the carefully conceived Rialto Center for the Performing Arts. The man caresses the instrument with fingertips that bring the heart and soul of Mozart into the very room in which we sit. His body moves with rhythmic accuracy. His breathing connects the notes like streams of bubbles colorful and floating dance-like around the hall. Seizo Azuma speaks the language of Beethoven, Liszt and others. The audience is rapt and quiet. At the conclusion of the concert, the audience rises without hesitation, applauding enthusiastically. Seizo smiles with his whole face, bows, collects his flowers, plays some more, bows some more, smiles some more and walks backstage to greet his admirers. A young child is overheard to say, "Mom, why was the concert so short?"

Pam enclosed the following note with her article. "As one of the directors of the International Conference, it was very difficult to get an overview of what was happening. Rather, I seemed to have collected just 'images' and feelings from what seemed like isolated situations. However the two images that stuck in my mind seemed related in the following way. On Monday evening during Seizo's performance, it occurred to me that we witnessed the most excellent result of the Suzuki Piano Method. Seizo has taken all of the best that the method offers and serves it to the audience each time he plays for us. It was a stunning performance in my memory. On Friday morning, I watched the child that I described in the story. At that point, I felt that I had witnessed the very beginning of Suzuki Piano Method - a child exposed to the environment of music. It was to this end that I felt that the conference was successful. We had in some way created a circle. I never could decide which story should go first because of this feeling, but I guess the child in the environment is the necessary beginning to what Dr. Suzuki wanted us all to understand:

Without this humble beginning there is no hope of excellence. We must continue to teach with this conviction. There is no limit to what can happen when we do this."

HOW PIANO BASICS TEACHERS ARE STUDYING:

SHORT WORKSHOPS

from Huntington Beach, California

by Gloria Krueger

Our Piano Basics group has brought guest teacher Cathy Williams-Hargrave into our area for short workshops five or six times annually since 1992. At these workshops, the area teachers receive short lessons with three hours of study in the morning and a lecture. Students are scheduled in the afternoons for lessons. Our last workshop was held in March of 1996 with an attendance of seventeen teachers, of which five were new. Twenty-one students had lessons during the two day workshop. Fall and winter, 1996 through May, 1997 have already been scheduled, again with Cathy as our guest teacher. Our group has benefited in many ways from this on-going training reflected in the continuing growth of our teachers and students.

From Portland, Oregon

by Jill Wellman

Piano Basics is growing in Oregon! Recently Connie Snyder and I combined our efforts and budgets to bring Dr. Karen Hagberg into the Portland and Salem areas. Karen was on a fourteen-day west coast tour so we were able to join with the other sponsoring workshops in keeping airfares low. We invited her to teach for a full day in our studios, working with teachers and students. Each evening she presented a session for our parents. We sent announcements to many area teachers and were surprised when three teachers came from as far away as Washington! Over the years, Connie and I have attended workshops in other areas but having Karen teach in our own studios was like having "Christmas in your own home." And now we are enjoying all of the "gifts" from this special occasion. Students are practicing better, parents say that there are less conflicts over practicing and Connie and I are highly motivated to meet periodically to continue our research.

RESEARCH GROUPS

From Salt Lake City, Utah

by Ellen Walker

The Salt Lake Piano Basics study group met weekly at Cleo Brimhall's home during this past year. Teachers from all along the Wasatch Front joined with the Salt Lake group and enjoyed learning from each other's experience and knowledge.

During the spring quarter, we studied the Mozart piano sonata, K. 545. Cleo encouraged us to limit our study to the first twelve measures, improving our abilities in this section before going on.

Our studies involved a review of Short Story from Book 2, because we noticed that it was good preparation for the K. 545 sonata with its alberti basses and scales. In practicing the C scale we worked with moving thumbs and fingers, to produce even tone. We tried different ways of playing the trill in measure four and studied different editions of the piece. Additionally, we listened to recordings by great artists and found qualities in each recording that we liked, enabling each of us to find what worked for us.

The Piano Basics group provides a good opportunity for interested teachers from near and far to meet together and enjoy each other's company. We enjoy Cleo's friendship and example, and the good environment of her home and studio. This Piano Basics group has been a rich opportunity for all involved, and we look forward to meeting together again this year. In the meantime, we'll keep practicing those scales!

RECITALS

From Matsumoto, Japan

by Keiko Ogiwara, Teacher, Talent Education Research Institute

Listening to the Atlanta 5-Piano concert made me think about our 10-Piano Concert in Matsumoto. Our present 10-Piano Concert was originally a 5-Piano concert. It was in April of 1986, exactly 10 years ago. However, it feels as if about 15 years have passed since then because of the many transformations that we have undergone.

With our first two or three concerts, the differences in teaching among the participating teachers was great. There still were students whose thumbs dropped or who had bad posture. There were students who were not fully prepared for their pieces and could not play their pieces through. Even at the stage when we began to work with ten students at a time, we found ourselves frantically trying to correct everything while also working hard to create the piece of music. The day of the concert would finally arrive and still there were many problems.

It was at that time that we had to define what are the "Basics" of playing the piano. So while learning about and learning to do the Basics, the 10-Piano concert rehearsals proceeded.

We had many concerns. No matter what we asked our students to do, they were not in any condition to be able to do it. The burden of what had to be accomplished seemed so monumental, even Kataoka Sensei spoke of quitting. That is when we teachers started realizing and thinking every day of what we should do.

To begin with, at every lesson we tried to teach as carefully as we could what we learned from our experience of doing the 10-Piano concerts. We did this for the entire year and a half until our next concert. We repeated this process eight times over the next ten years.

Meanwhile in preparations for the day of each concert, we researched the steps necessary to polish a piece.

Our experience with the 10-Piano rehearsals has brought us to an invaluable place in our study.

It has been only five or six years since Kataoka Sensei told us she would quit, but when you view this year's 10-Piano video you will be able to witness the accomplishment of having all, each and every student from Matsumoto, be able to see the Piano Basics of playing over the keys. For every single student, the level is consistent.

In Matsumoto, we have many concerts throughout the year:

- At the Spring and Fall concerts, each student plays solo in one or the other. There are three concerts each time, at 10 a.m., 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. with approximately 30 students in each.
- About 30 teachers from Nagano Prefecture hold four concerts per year with the participation of two or three students per teacher.
- For the advanced students, we have the "Saturday Evening Concert" with about 15 students performing once a month.
- For beginning students, we have our so-called "First Step Concert." This is for students who play up to the first graduation piece, Bach's Minuet 2 in Book 2. It is held three times a year with approximately 30 students each time.
- Between October and December, there are three public concerts of graduation pieces which are taped.

Therefore, by providing many concerts, the students have the opportunity to see and hear each other. They are able to observe and listen to others playing pieces that they are presently working on and pieces they will be studying in the future. Furthermore, the performers not only play a polished piece once, but have the opportunity to perform it in concert several times, continually improving and becoming good at it. This experience stimulates in students the desire and dream to play the piece in the future, and they become self-motivated to work hard in their study.

Some students may think that they will quit as soon as they are able to play a certain piece. Meanwhile, listening to the advanced students, they decide that they want to play still another piece and find themselves unable to quit.

Also, very importantly, after the concerts all the teachers gather for a meeting to discuss every piece. A clear assessment from Kataoka Sensei that a student did well is great encouragement that one is teaching well and can continue confidently.

The concerts not only have great value for the students, but also for the teachers. It is truly a wonderful way for teachers to study.

This is the essence of how students and teachers mutually study in Matsumoto.

TO ALL PIANO BASICS FOUNDATION MEMBERS

From Karen Hagberg, President

With this issue of the **Piano Basics Foundation News**, Piano Basics Foundation is coming to the end of our first year in existence. The officers and board members have been both pleased and surprised that our membership already includes over 300 teachers and parents in nine countries and in thirty-six states in the U.S. Moreover, our membership is steadily increasing.

You, our teacher and parent members, have been making good use of the various services offered by the Foundation. The publication of **How to teach Beginners** earlier this year was our first project. This and Dr. Kataoka's **Sensibility and Education**, have been in high demand, and we have filled hundreds of orders as well for other books, videotapes and recordings which help teachers do their job as effectively as possible.

This newsletter has followed the activities of Dr. Kataoka both inside and outside Japan, and has reported on various Piano Basics groups around the world. Members have reported that the newsletter is a springboard for new ideas and a vehicle through which our local activities may be shared with others in distant places. In short, we have formed a vital, dynamic network in the space of just a few months. We have, indeed, already come to rely on the Foundation to provide the professional support we need to do our work.

Membership in Piano Basics Foundation is on a fiscal year basis. This means that whenever a member joins in 1996, s/he is a member for 1996 only, and that all memberships are up for renewal on January 1, 1997.

In order to conserve our precious resources, we are printing this reminder in lieu of sending out renewal notices to each member. All members must pay their dues (\$25.00) for the 1997 fiscal year by March 1, 1997 in order to continue receiving their newsletters, to be listed in the directory and to continue as members in good standing with all the benefits of membership.

Membership fees and donations to Piano Basics Foundation are tax-deductible. If you get your renewal to us before January 1, teachers may deduct it from this year's taxable income. Donations are tax-deductible as well.

All members of Piano Basics Foundation benefit from your membership and participation. We invite you to remain on board into our second year! We also encourage you, if you can, to donate generously. Those many who gave money this year helped the Foundation pay for its extensive start-up costs. Thank you all on behalf of all our members! We anticipate legal fees in the coming year over and above operating costs which are covered by membership, and by 1998 we expect to begin taking on the financial responsibility for our International Suzuki Piano Conferences. In short, all donations are greatly appreciated and will be put to good use. As was the case this year, contributors will be acknowledged in our Directory.

There are not many kinds of work which are as rewarding, challenging and gratifying as teaching children. And there is so very much work to be done. Let us all work with a spirit of cooperation and dedication and face our great challenge together, remembering that, "Only art can save the world."

PIANO BASICS FOUNDATION

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Please send your articles, letters or comments to the editorial staff:

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DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE - DECEMBER 15, 1996

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